

WHY AND HOW TO GET UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

If you are serious about psychology as a major, then you should consider getting involved in research. We recommend that students get involved with a research lab as early as their sophomore year, but no later than the fall of their junior year, especially if they have aspirations for (a) doing an Honors Thesis in their senior year and (b) going to graduate school in psychology or a related discipline. This document describes the process by which undergraduate students can get involved in research in the Department of Psychology at Tulane University.

Undergraduate Research Assistants

Why Do Research? Much of life is about the process of finding things out. Whether you want to do comparison shopping for a new car or find the best treatment for your loved one's diagnosis of cancer, every thinking person will engage in some sort of research activity during their lives. Research is simply the formal methodology for discovering answers to questions. In science, research is the formal methodology for discovering answers to questions that have not already been answered by somebody else. Research is therefore the process of generating new knowledge. All the sciences depend upon research to discover new information. While, different disciplines have different formal methodologies for conducting research, all the sciences and social sciences share the common principles for what constitutes the process of discovering and verifying the integrity of new information. Research in psychology is the means by which anything new about human behavior is understood. Applied fields (e.g., health care, the practice of law, engineering, teaching and education, human services and social work, and business) all in turn, use the products of research to inform their work.

Why do a Research Assistantship? Because most faculty members do not want to sponsor an Honors Thesis with someone they do not know, it is imperative that you plan ahead and get to know the faculty working within the area of psychology that most interests you. You should start by applying to become a Research Assistant in one of the faculty research labs. Research assistants can earn academic credit toward the major by enrolling in PSYC 351, 352, 491, or 492 (Special Projects or Independent Study) with a faculty member of choice. Some faculty may require students to volunteer first before committing to include undergraduates as Research Assistants in their labs. Summer volunteer or employment opportunities are also often available.

What if you do not want to do an honor's thesis, but are still planning to go to graduate school? Or even business, law, or medical school? Then you will need undergraduate research experience for several reasons. First, most if not all graduate programs in psychology are designed to train research scientists. Therefore, getting involved in research as an undergraduate sort of "gets your feet wet" so that you gain an understanding of what is expected of you in graduate school. Also, you learn some basic research skills such as data collection, entry, and analysis and how to conduct literature searches that you will use in graduate school. Next, working in a variety of research labs

helps you narrow down which area of psychology you most enjoy. Finally, one of the requirements in the selection process for graduate school is the submission of 3 or more letters of recommendation. Ideally, you want at least 2 of these letters to be from faculty members with whom you have conducted research. Again, you are encouraged to get involved early, because it takes time (e.g., more than one semester) for each faculty member to get to know your skills and potential as a graduate student. Faculty members are much more comfortable writing recommendation letters for students they know very well. As such, the strongest letters of recommendation often reflect one year or more of work in a research lab.

How to Become a Research Assistant: In order to apply to become a research assistant in a faculty member's lab you will need to review their specific requirements (including prerequisite coursework, minimum GPA, time commitments). You may need to complete a brief application and interview for the position. The available positions in a lab may fill quickly, so you should plan in advance for the semester that you wish start. The following link describes each faculty member's policies for accepting undergraduate research assistants into their lab.

The Honors Thesis

Selecting an Area: This part should be fairly easy, and it is primarily up to you. In what area of psychology (e.g., [child] clinical, cognitive, developmental, neuroscience, personality, psychobiology, social, quantitative, industrial/organizational) are you most interested?

- If you're planning to apply for graduate school, in what area?
- Have you been a research assistant in an area you really enjoy?
- Have your courses tended to focus in a specific area?
- Have you taken a course that particularly grabbed your interest?
- Is there some burning question in psychology that you've always wanted to answer?

What if almost everything about psychology interests you and you can't narrow down the choices? Go to the next section.

Selecting an Honors Thesis Director: It usually follows that once you've selected an area, you find a faculty member within that area to serve as your advisor. The Psychology Department web page contains information about the research interests of the faculty members in the department. Although many students start with an area and identify an appropriate faculty member, it is equally common for a student to reverse these steps (to start with a faculty member and discover an area from that person). The important thing to remember is that you cannot receive final acceptance into the program until you are paired with an Honor's Thesis Director, so this is not a step on which you can afford to procrastinate.

Any member of the faculty within the Psychology Department is a possible candidate for a Thesis Director. Two important considerations in selecting a Director are to find someone who is willing to supervise you, and to find someone with whom you think you'll work well. Some students emphasize the latter, and start by choosing a faculty member.

- Is there a faculty member whose work really fascinates you?
- Have you done research you've really enjoyed in someone's lab?
- Did you take a course from someone who really interested you?
- Is there a faculty member with whom you really get along well?

Any of the above may be acceptable reasons for choosing a Director. Most faculty members will only sponsor an Honors Thesis student who has already done research in their lab, so getting involved in research is strongly encouraged. If you become involved in research early (no later than by the fall of your junior year), then you have the option to explore other research areas if the first one doesn't work out.

Once you've identified a faculty member as a prospective director, you need to initiate contact with him or her. This should be done as soon as possible after the decision, but no later than the deadline for turning in the **Honor Thesis Intent Form**. Painful as this may seem, there's no way around it, so don't put this off! Stop by during office hours or make an appointment. Although using email to make appointments is fine, a face-to-face discussion is preferred for discussing the possibility of supervising your thesis. Most faculty members are reluctant to supervise a thesis if they have not met the student in person.

Here are some things to keep in mind during your meeting:

- Many faculty members are delighted to work with top (honors) undergraduates.
- You want to convince a faculty member that there is something to gain from working with you. Plan what you will say. Be confident and tell this person why you would like to work with him or her.
- A faculty member may decline your request if he or she is already spread over too many projects, will be on leave, or thinks your area of interest is too far from his or her own. Do not take this personally. It happens. Try someone else.

Selecting a Topic: Your thesis advisor is there to teach and to advise you. He or she has years of experience in conducting research. The process of developing a thesis topic is one of collaboration. Don't worry about getting an idea on your own. Talk to your thesis advisor. He or she will get you pointed in the right direction with a program of readings that will help you generate ideas. Whether you come in with a fairly clear idea of what you want to study, or you only know the broad area, your faculty advisor will want to discuss the ideas and work with you to refine them. The final topic will probably be one in which both of you had some input. It will also be something in which each of you has an interest.